

The Rediscovery of America

*Essays by Harry V. Jaffa on the
New Birth of Politics*

Edited by Edward J. Erler
and Ken Masugi

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To the students of Harry V. Jaffa

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FOUR

The Reichstag is Still Burning

*The Failure of Higher Education
and the Decline of the West: A Valedictory Lecture*

INTRODUCTION

Harry Jaffa's 1989 farewell to full-time faculty status at Claremont McKenna College exemplifies the moral and intellectual objectives of his entire career. He begins his lecture with an expression of duty, to a faithful patron, and concludes with a quotation from Abraham Lincoln's Cooper Institute speech, to "do our duty as we understand it," thus rising from an expression of gratitude to a justification of a way of life. He recounts the 1968–1969 surrender of a reputed conservative college administration to terrorists and other thugs, a pattern repeated ever since at the college. His story of the collapse of a putatively "conservative" institution under threats of violence remains unremarked.

Jaffa's observations continue his confrontation of Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind*, in chapter 3. He confronts the violent enemies of civilization and their cowardly academic facilitators and then concludes by describing "that metaphysical freedom of the mind that, as Jefferson rightly declared, is the ground of all moral freedom, and hence of civil and religious liberty." Americans who are truly concerned with education will promote the life of the mind by living as free Americans, both knowing and acting upon their fundamental principles. Jaffa's treatise is a guide not only to survival but of living well, in exercising one's rights but even more fulfilling the duties one has to the academy, to America, and to western civilization.

The editors thank The Claremont Institute for permission to reprint the text of this 1989 lecture.

THE REICHSTAG IS STILL BURNING: THE FAILURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE DECLINE OF THE WEST:

A Valedictory Lecture,¹ by Harry V. Jaffa

While abandoning the idea of natural right and through abandoning it. . . . German thought . . . was led . . . to unqualified relativism. What was a tolerably accurate description of German thought twenty-seven years ago would now appear to be true of Western thought in general. It would not be the first time that a nation, defeated on the battlefield and, as it were, annihilated as a political being, has deprived its conquerors of the most sublime fruit of victory by imposing on them the yoke of its own thought. —Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 1953

Professor Strauss has singlehandedly revived the serious study of ancient political thought and shown that it is not merely an object of historical curiosity but is relevant to our most vital present interests. —Allan Bloom, Foreword to Agora Edition of *On Tyranny*, 1965

[I]t was Heidegger, practically [sic] alone, for whom the study of Greek Philosophy became truly central. . . . [pp. 309–310] —Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 1987

I dedicate this lecture to the memory of Jerene Appleby Harnish. I met Mrs. Harnish some time during my first year in Claremont, when I was paraded before her—as I was before a number of conservative donors to the college—as a Goldwater speech writer. With her, as with Henry Salvatori, I formed a lasting friendship. Appleby Hall at Claremont McKenna College [CMC] is a reminder of her generosity, as is the Appleby Fund which for a number of years brought Thai students to CMC. Many of our Thai graduates have attained distinction, as well as influence and prestige, within their native land. All of them have remained friends, and some of them very great friends, of the United States, and of the principles upon which the United States was founded. In recent years, the Appleby Fund has augmented the research support I have enjoyed as Salvatori Professor, and I hope this lecture will be some small acknowledgment of that assistance.

Beyond my gratitude and affectionate regard, I intend to record here some of the events over which Jerene and I agonized together, and the convictions we shared during the time of troubles that befell higher education two decades ago.

Allan Bloom began his now famous chapter on “The Sixties” in *The Closing of the American Mind* as follows.

"You don't have to intimidate us," said the famous professor of philosophy in April 1969, to ten thousand triumphant students supporting a group of black students who had persuaded "us," the faculty of Cornell University, to do their will by threatening the use of firearms as well as threatening the lives of individual professors. A member of the ample press corps newly specialized in reporting the hottest item of the day, the university, muttered, "You said it, brother." The reporter had learned a proper contempt for the moral and intellectual qualities of professors. Servility, vanity, and lack of conviction are not difficult to discern. (*Closing*, p. 313)

The servility, vanity, lack of conviction—and plain cowardice—of the Claremont faculties and their administrations, was certainly not less than that displayed at Cornell. What was different in Claremont was that there was no "ample press corps" to display our shame to the outside world and, incidentally, to offer at least the protection of publicity to those whose lives were threatened. That protection was not inconsiderable if the reporters were—as at Cornell—from a newspaper of the stature of the *New York Times*. Such reporters were less likely to be intimidated by radical students or by local authorities than those from the local press.

In mid-afternoon of a February day in 1969 two pipe bombs exploded in Claremont—some 40 seconds apart. The first went off in a basement restroom of Balch Hall on the Scripps campus. Fortunately no one was there at the time, and no one was injured. The second, in an unaddressed parcel, had been placed in the mailbox of Lee Macdonald, Chairman of the Political Science Department at Pomona College. It detonated when the 19-year-old secretary of the department—the wife of a Claremont Men's College senior—picked it up. Her injuries were terrible, and included disfigurement, the loss of all sight in one eye, and damage to her hands that has required at least twenty-five reconstructive surgeries. According to information received from her attorney, Pomona College has—apart from her medical expenses—paid her no more than what was due to her, as an employee of the college, under the Workmen's Compensation Law. (I was tempted to say "when the accident occurred," except that what occurred was not an accident.) I mention this not merely to suggest that her treatment by the College was cold and mean-spirited, which it was. It is to point out that if she had been a black activist, or a white activist in the cause of black power—she would instantly have been celebrated as a victim of racism. A benefit fund for her relief—and a scholarship fund for her children—would have been established. She would have been the subject of countless articles and speeches, and perhaps even a movie, "Claremont Burning." The one thing that would never have happened, is what did happen: she was forgotten. I recall one AP wire service story that crossed the nation the day the bomb went off, and then, after a short flurry in the local media, silence. In the twenty years that have intervened I have told this story hundreds of times. I have

never met anyone outside of Claremont who knew about it. I have never met anyone in Claremont who was not here at the time—and that includes students who came in the fall of 1969, and in all the years that have followed—who knew about it. To the best of my knowledge, the bombs that exploded in Claremont in February of 1969 were the first bombs to explode on any American campus in that time of turbulence across the nation. This dubious distinction is one that has been as thoroughly suppressed as any of the innumerable non-events that have occurred within the Soviet Union, at any time in the last 70 years, or until the arrival of *Glasnost*. The shabby treatment of this innocent victim reflects less the miserliness or parsimony of this extremely wealthy college, than a collective desire of all the colleges to suppress the memory of what happened. She was the “wrong” kind of victim, and therefore didn’t count.

But the shame does not stop here. No arrest in the case was ever made, although shortly after the Claremont episode a young Black Panther in San Francisco engaged in putting together a pipe bomb blew himself up. It was common knowledge at the time that there was a Panther unit in the nearby City of Pomona, supplying “technical assistance” to the radical students on campus. Had Pomona or Scripps or any of the other colleges had any real interest in finding the criminals who planted the bombs, they would have offered a substantial reward for information leading to arrests and convictions. They never did. They were perfectly terrified at the prospect of what might happen if there were arrests. (I remember that about this time the President of Yale—Kingman Brewster—took out an insurance policy by declaring that a Black Panther could not get a fair trial in the courts of the United States.) So there was a stream of official statements declaring that they did not know who planted the bombs, but that they were sure nevertheless that it was not any one of our students.

Nor—to the best of my knowledge—was any arrest ever made in connection with the 25 fires that followed the bombings, over the next 10 weeks. Most of the fires were relatively small affairs, usually caused by dousing the draperies in the lounges of the dormitories with kerosene—or lighter fluid—and then igniting them. The damage was limited because the students in the dormitories, not wishing to be incinerated in their sleep, ran night patrol, and most of the fires were extinguished promptly. One of them was in an equipment storage area under the stadium seats of Parents’ Field, CMC. One at Mead Hall, Pitzer College, caused—I believe—over \$100,000 in damage. The largest of the fires completely destroyed Story House on the Claremont Men’s College campus. Of that, more later. It was the iron-clad policy of all six colleges, never to have police on campus, and—to repeat—never to have anyone arrested. If no one was arrested, the question of amnesty—the question that tore the Cornell faculty apart—could not arise. The underlying—or overarching—policy of the colleges, as it became manifest, was one of pre-emptive

surrender to the demands of the radicals. And how can you arrest someone to whom you are surrendering?

I may illustrate this policy further by a personal experience. I had written a letter to the Board of Trustees of Claremont Men's College, outlining the sequence of recent events, including therein explicit public threats of arson and other forms of violence. The official view, as I have said, was that no one knew who was responsible for the bombings or the fires and that therefore no one could say that there was any connection between the bombings, the fires, and the threats. In my letter, I was careful not to contradict this official view. I only narrated what was a matter of public record. (It was however like narrating the statistics on smoking and lung cancer, without contradicting the tobacco companies' denial of any causal relationship between them.) I asked the trustees to adopt a policy of making no decision upon any of the demands of the radicals, until the threats had ceased, so that whatever was decided would be the result of deliberation and not intimidation. A copy of my letter got into the hands of the radicals, who promptly published it in the *Collegian*, together with an editorial—and numerous columns and letters—denouncing me for having made false accusations. Since I had made no accusations, it is clear that my adversaries believed that the mere narration of the facts had constituted accusations.

About this time, one of the leaders of the Black Students Union, in Collins Dining Hall on the Claremont Men's College campus, conspicuously and publicly urged that someone should take a gun and shoot me. The threat—if understood to be meant seriously—was a felony. In the wake of the bombings, how could it have been regarded as other than serious? Be that as it may, no criminal complaint was filed—that was altogether out of the question—the young man was subjected to no disciplinary proceedings whatever, and he was not even admonished or reprimanded by anyone in (or, so far as I could tell, out of) authority. The following year found him at Yale Law School, whither he had gone with the enthusiastic recommendation of the College. Had anyone on the faculty—or in the student body—who opposed the Black Studies Center—made such a threat against him, a criminal complaint would certainly have been filed. The offender would have been denounced as a racist, and if the charges were proved he would—whether a student or a tenured faculty member—have been expelled. Let me only add that I believe such punishment would have been just. But such penalties should not be for one side only. When some of my students asked the authorities for protection for me, they were told that I had brought the problem on myself, and it was not their concern. In short, I was at fault for expressing opinions which the advocates of Black Power had found offensive. Civil liberties, not to mention academic freedom, were at a discount.

The climax of the demand for a Black Studies Center came in a meeting of the Black and (Brown) Students' Unions, with the faculty of Clare-

mont Men's College. The meeting was climactic, because all the other five Claremont colleges had endorsed the principle of establishing Black (and Brown) Studies Centers, centers which would be at once autonomous and racially or ethnically pure. CMC was known to be something of a bastion of resistance, and there was at least a question as to whether the other colleges would scale back—if not abandon—the project if CMC did not undertake its share of the cost. In short, we were the nut that had to be cracked.

The meeting, as I recall, began around 4 p.m. President Benson was in the chair, and he announced at the outset that we would adjourn at 6 p.m. When that hour arrived, our guests said that they would decide when we might leave. The assembly then continued for another half hour, when Dr. Benson declared it over. Amid a good deal of tumult he was escorted from the hall by two members of the faculty who happened to have unusually large and powerful physiques.

The demands of the Black Students Union showed it to be—in its own mind—a continuation of the Civil Rights movement. The theme of its pronouncements however was Black Power—the very opposite of the color blind principles espoused by Dr. King on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963. The Black Power movement demanded recognition, not of “the content of character” but of the color of skin. It wanted a Black Studies Center, not to enrich the curriculum, but to bring Black Power to bear upon it. There was no wish to eliminate racial bias from the courses of study in the Claremont Colleges. Rather did it wish to encounter white bias with black bias. The assumption was that an unbiased education was a delusion. Education was understood to be, not a function of the freedom of the human mind, but of its determination by race and ethnicity. What stands out finally in my memory of this meeting, was the declaration of a Brown leader, that he had been in Vietnam, and had seen there what bullets could do, and that he knew therefore what they could do in Claremont. This was followed by a rhetorical question asked by a Black leader—a young woman who the next year was an assistant dean at Pomona College. The question was, “Do you want this campus burned down this summer or next summer?”

The meeting with the radical students occurred on a Wednesday afternoon. The faculty meeting to consider their demands was scheduled for the following Monday. On the Sunday night before this Monday meeting Story House was gutted by fire. It was about this time that I drafted the letter to the Trustees. Before sending it I called the Fire Chief of Claremont, to ask his opinion of the cause of the conflagration. He answered, without hesitation, that it had been caused by “spontaneous combustion.” It was the old steam pipes in the basement, he said. This was the tale told in the local press as well. Sometime later, a group of students from Pomona College's *Student Life*, with the aid of an arson expert, studied the ruins of Story House, and found incontrovertible evidence

that the point of origin of the fire was the library, where kerosene had been poured on the books. I trust that this further symbolic identification with the Third Reich will not be missed! What this showed however was not so much the fact of arson—which no one had ever really doubted—as the extent to which (again, as in the Third Reich) the conspiracy to protect those engaged in criminal activity had involved public officials charged with the public safety. Let me anticipate the rest of the story by mentioning here that, from the moment of the capitulation of the Colleges, there were no more campus fires—by spontaneous combustion or by any other cause.

This account indicates the environment within which the CMC faculty met to consider and to vote upon the demands being made upon it. As the event transpired, there were two proposals before the faculty. When the vote was taken, each member could vote for one or the other. One was called the Diamond/Fisk/Jaffa proposal. It called for a program of Black (and Brown) studies, the courses therein to be developed within the framework of the existing academic structure. Courses in Black (or Mexican-American) literature would be developed and taught in literature departments, which would be responsible for hiring competent instructors. The same would be true of courses in, for example, history, economics, political science, or philosophy. This proposal denied that education in itself was a function of race. It implied as well that the colleges, however imperfect, were not inherently racist and corrupt. It implied therefore that a non-discriminatory policy was possible and that non-racial academic standards ought to prevail.

The alternative to the Diamond/Fisk/Jaffa plan represented at once a repudiation of the legitimacy of the existing academic structure and an outright endorsement of the principle of racially exclusive “centers.” It contained—altogether incidentally—a financial arrangement designed to minimize the cost of implementing such an endorsement. But everyone—with one possible exception—knew that this was irrelevant to our deliberations. Once the proposal was approved, its implementation by the restructuring of the Claremont Colleges would be accomplished by deliberations *de novo*. The only purpose of our vote was to decide whether we would—or would not—endorse the concept of race as a ground or basis of education. And this endorsement was accomplished fully and unequivocally by a preamble in which it was said that Claremont Men’s College had been—and was at that moment—“a white college that gave a white education.”

In the course of the ensuing debate I asked repeatedly whether it was true that CMC, providing a “white education” taught white mathematics, or white economics, or white biology, or white physics, or for that matter, white political science. Was there anything in Plato’s *Republic*, I asked, that indicated that it was “white justice” that Socrates was seeking to define or discover. Was there anything in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, I asked,

to indicate that it was “white happiness” that Aristotle sought as the *summum bonum*? Was there anything in Locke’s *Second Treatise of Civil Government* (or in the Declaration of Independence) to indicate that taxation without representation was unjust only for whites? Was their anything in Locke’s *Letters on Toleration* (or in the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom) I asked, to indicate that it was only in the case of white human beings, that “our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions, any more than our opinions in physics or geometry”? Although I hammered away at these questions, the opposition was uninterested in debating them. “The philosophers have hitherto interpreted the world,” Karl Marx had written. “The point is however to change it.” Debate, like religion, had become in their minds only an opiate. You defeated your opponent’s arguments by trampling on your opponents, and by treating them with contempt.

The other side, although it did not have a reasoned argument, did have what might be called a position. This consisted in two elements. The one was a confession of white guilt. Of course, the very idea of white guilt contradicted the idea that we were engaged in dispensing only a white education. How could a white mind recognize a black mind as equally a mind, unless mind as such transcends the distinction of color? The response to this question was to be found in something entirely different, in a commitment to relativism. Relativism began with the assertion that the dispositions of our minds or souls, all the grounds upon which we hold anything to be true or good or precious, are rooted in our cultures. But there is no trans-cultural (or trans-historical) point of view from which different cultures can be measured or judged. In fact, there was no objective foundation for the dignity—or indignity—of any culture. All cultures being equally without such a foundation, were objectively equal in dignity. Because our curricula had failed to assimilate the truth of relativism, we had wrongly imputed a superior dignity and importance to American (and Western) culture. The Black and Brown Centers were only the beginning of a new openness—a new commitment to tolerance and diversity—based upon the equality of all human cultures.

The allegedly rational foundation of this openness was the realization of the non-rational foundations, not only of all cultures, but of all moral preferences and all “lifestyles.” All were grounded in “value judgments” which were rooted in our subconscious selves, which sometimes produced illusions of reason (called “ideologies”), but which were never rational in themselves. We were off-shoots of white Western culture, in all our habits of thought and feeling and expression, whether we knew it or not. We were guilty—the argument ran—because as members of our culture we shared a collective unconscious ethnocentrism which constituted something very much akin—or so it seemed—to Original Sin. In any event, as an institution of higher learning, we could be saved by the gospel of relativism. We had a duty to lead the way out of the dark night

of ego-and ethno-centricity, to the heavenly uplands of diversity and tolerance.

Of course for anyone not completely in the grip of unreason, it should have been apparent that the claims of relativism—which were made with respect to all human cultures, past, present and future—were themselves inherently and necessarily trans-cultural and trans-historical. The argument for relativism was in fact an argument for a totally new culture. There was no existing or previous culture—certainly no African or Mexican culture—among all those to be admitted to equality with western culture, that recognized the alleged truth of relativism. The only civilization that had ever recognized the equal humanity (not the equal dignity) of all cultures was Western civilization. Indeed, the first nation ever to have declared its right to independence, not upon the ground of any peculiar virtues of its own, but upon the ground of rights which it shared with all men everywhere, was the United States of America. And the doctrine of relativism itself, however self-contradictory, was nonetheless an authentic offspring of modern Western culture and philosophy.

Looking back from the perspective of 1989, we may say that the argument in the Claremont Men's College faculty in 1969 followed, as if it had been scripted, the argument sketched in 1949 by Leo Strauss, in the lectures that became *Natural Right and History*. At the bottom of the passionate rejection of all "absolutes" we discern the recognition of a natural right or, more precisely, of that particular interpretation of natural right according to which the one thing needful is respect for diversity or individuality. But there is a tension between the respect for diversity or individuality and the recognition of natural right. When liberals became impatient of the absolute limits to diversity or individuality that are imposed even by the most liberal version of natural right, they had to make a choice between natural right and the uninhibited cultivation of individuality. They chose the latter. Once this step was taken, tolerance appeared as one value or ideal among many, and not intrinsically superior to its opposite. In other words, intolerance appeared as a value equal in dignity to tolerance. But it is practically impossible to leave it at the equality of all preferences or choices. If the unequal rank of choices cannot be traced to the unequal rank of their objectives, it must be traced to the unequal rank of the acts of choosing; and this means eventually that genuine choice, as distinguished from spurious or despicable choice, is nothing but resolute or deadly serious decision. Such a decision, however, is akin to intolerance rather than to tolerance. Liberal relativism has its roots in the natural right tradition or in the notion that everyone has a natural right to the pursuit happiness as he understands happiness; but in itself it is a seminary of intolerance.

The faculty debate, while the embers of Story House still smoldered, was an exercise in the elimination of diversity in a seminary of intolerance. I once asked a teen-aged student who was among the leaders of the

Black Students Union, why he was so sure of himself. He replied, "Because of my sincerity." I then asked him if he thought that Hitler had been any less sincere than he was. He merely stared blankly at me. However, by then he knew that he—not I—represented majority sentiment in the faculties. Representing the most resolute and daring part of the community, he had come to be recognized as the embodiment of majority sentiment.

While I do not recall the exact numbers, I remember that the Diamond/Fisk/Jaffa proposal lost by a margin of five votes. Had three of our colleagues voted differently, the result might have been reversed. I do not believe that, in any of the other Claremont Colleges, the cause of human decency came anywhere near as close to success. Nevertheless, there was a large minority scattered among the other colleges who were prepared to unite in resistance to the intimidation to which we are all being subjected, and there was a number of campus wide meetings. The roll of honor was a long one, and I omit attempting any enumeration at this distance in time because it would do injustice to so many. I would not want anyone to think, however, that in articulating such arguments as these, I was fighting alone.

My greatest disappointment however was in the Claremont Men's College trustees. Besides sending the letter I have described, I called several of them. Their attitude was invariably friendly, and invariably patronizing. They all reassured me that I was unnecessarily anxious and apprehensive. They were unanimous in telling me that they would never vote to approve any demand so ludicrous as a Black Studies Center. When the time came, however, they voted unanimously—or so I was told—but not in the sense they had told me. One of those with whom I spoke would one day become an Attorney General of the United States. A year or two later I had a conversation with a trustee of one of the other Claremont colleges, a man notable for his hard-edged Conservative political convictions. I lamented the cowardliness, the utter lack of conviction of the Colleges—including the trustees—in doing their duty in the face of intimidation. He said, "You don't understand, Harry. Rome wasn't built in a day." I replied, "You don't understand. Rome is not being built. Rome is burning." He was as blank and uncomprehending as that teenage black. All of these trustees were as tough as nails over their brandy and cigars, at the end of comfortable banquets. Apparently however it was not Churchill's brandy that they drank, or Churchill's cigars that they smoked. Since they themselves were far from the bombs and the fires and the threats, it is hard to comprehend their detachment and pusillanimity. They could have made a difference, but they would not do so.

All those who voted for the proposal that we were a "white college" providing a "white education" had been told, over and over again, before they voted, that the idea that education (or the human mind) could have

a color or a race—other than that of the human race—was the essential and underlying principle of the Third Reich. They had been told that our nation had been founded, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, upon “an abstract truth applicable to all men and all times.” Like jesting Pilate, they asked “What is truth?” and would not stay for an answer. None of them took seriously the idea of such trans-cultural or trans-historical truth, as is represented by either the Declaration of Independence or the Bible. The only truth, in their minds, that was trans-cultural or trans-historical, was the truth that there is no trans-cultural, trans-historical truth. The most radical form of relativism is radical historicism. Leo Strauss has written that it was the contempt for permanent standards for human life and human action that

permitted the most radical historicist in 1933 to submit to, or rather to welcome, as a dispensation of fate, the verdict of the least wise and least moderate part of his nation while it was in its least wise and least moderate mood, and at the same time to speak of wisdom and moderation. (*What Is Political Philosophy?* p. 27.)

In deferring to the “wisdom and moderation” of teenage gangsters in the re-structuring of higher education, the faculties, administrations and—ultimately, the trustees—of the Claremont Colleges showed a contempt for the idea of civilization—no less than of education—that was not essentially different from that of the German university professors—led by Heidegger—who had welcomed Hitler in 1933. We were saved—at least for the moment—from the full consequences of our folly by the fact that, although the cause of Hitler flourished on our campuses, it did not control the action of the government, as it had done in Germany. That Richard Nixon was President of the United States, and that Ronald Reagan was Governor of California—and that both expressed their sympathy with our beleaguered cause—did much to keep our morale high, even as we lost the battle on the campus itself. Our thanks was due to the genius of our Founding, and the strength of our political institutions. How long that strength could withstand this moral cancer, remained—and still remains—to be seen.

I add here this footnote. Immediately after the vote endorsing the ethnic centers, the faculty turned to the election of representatives to serve on the committee that would draw up the plans for the new centers. One-half the membership of this committee would be students, who would have the same voting rights as the faculty members. At this point I declared my refusal to take part in the discussion or the voting, on the ground that I believed this action to be *ultra vires*. Under our corporate charters, I held, such a delegation of authority to persons without any academic credentials was unlawful. In taking this position I was alone.

Except for the activism centered around Vietnam in the years immediately following 1969, the following decades have been relatively free of

violent confrontations. The Vietnam protests were directed at government rather than academic policy. Yet they too assumed the illegitimacy of the principles of Western civilization as embodied in our Declaration of Independence and our Constitution. Presently, Watergate, followed by the fall of Saigon, represented a victory for student—and faculty—radicalism in the political sphere, which paralleled what had earlier been achieved in the academic sphere.

Meanwhile, the attrition of the principles under assault two decades ago has continued unabated. Most of those who resisted the radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s have faded from the scene, and they have been replaced by and large from the ranks of the radicals themselves. If these seem less revolutionary today, it is because they themselves control the levers of power on our campuses.

Let me illustrate the course of events by three incidents. In the early 1970s Claremont Men's College produced a house organ entitled *Res Publica*. Its first issue included an article entitled "Amoral America" by President-emeritus George C. S. Benson, and one by Joseph Hough, the Chairman of the Religion Department at Claremont Graduate School (who was then also Acting Dean—later Dean—of the School of Theology). Hough's article was entitled "Dilemma: The Liberal and the Church." I wrote a critique of both articles, entitled "Amoral America and the Liberal Dilemma."

My criticism of the former was that "Like Socrates . . . Dr. Benson seems better at exhorting us to education in virtue, than in instructing us in what it is." This followed the critique of Socrates in the *Kleitophon*, and the line of criticism that Aristotle takes, in reproaching Plato, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In due time I received a response which was not unlike what Plato—or a follower of Plato—might have given to Aristotle.

Dean Hough's article, however, was altogether a different matter. It was essentially an adaptation to the exigencies of liberation theology of Herbert Marcuse's *Repressive Tolerance*. Its thesis was that liberals should not be afraid of being considered illiberal, when it was necessary to adopt the rough methods sometimes required to bring about social change. When Hough published these sentiments, the utility of the bombings and the burnings in bringing about "liberation" in Claremont was fresh in everyone's minds. The true role of the churches was not defined, said Hough, by "the personal salvation style of conservatism." It was rather that of a "social action ministry" which required "group decision and mobilization" of "cadres" of the committed. A "non-political vision of meaning" was rejected by Dean Hough because he found it to be inconsistent with "the neo-Marxist criticism of the separation of meaning from action. . . ." I pointed out that there was no difference, known to me, between a neo-Marxist and a Marxist "criticism of the separation of meaning from action." It was Marx's thesis on Feuerbach—which I have already quoted—which underlay both Marcuse's and Hough's protest

against “bourgeois” tolerance. Meaning—and liberation—was to be found in the unity of theory and practice preached by Karl Marx. Hence true liberalism—according to Hough—was not to be found in any overnice attachment to civil liberties. It was to be found in resolute action, otherwise known as revolution.

I have taken pains to summarize my critique of Hough’s article—which critique is reprinted both in my book, *The Conditions of Freedom*,² and in *A Symposium*, published by the Claremont Committee for Academic Freedom—because *Res Publica* refused to publish it. What Hough wrote was a justification of the policy of the Claremont Colleges in refusing to defend either academic freedom or civil liberty, while submitting to gangsterism. I no doubt offended the editors, in part because I was much clearer in presenting Hough’s argument than he was himself; but I was also candid in explicating the implications of his appeal to Marxist principles—although the fact of his appeal to those principles was itself explicit and overt. There was a lengthy correspondence with the editorial authorities—reprinted in *A Symposium*—which even today is instructive reading. I was admonished not to yield to “the temptation of putting down a colleague” and told to learn to write “in a different style.” These reproofs were remarkably similar to those once directed to Solzhenitsyn by Soviet authorities. Of course, I was not prevented from publishing what I had written. But I was prevented from addressing the same audience that Hough had addressed in circumstances that might have compelled him to engage in genuine debate. *Res Publica* had declared itself to be a “platform for provocative articles which deal with public affairs. . . .” But the provocation it countenanced was severely limited and certainly one-sided. Thomas Jefferson had written that

truth is great and will prevail if left to herself, that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and has nothing to fear from the conflict unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument and debate, errors ceasing to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them.

Reasoned argument is the ground of truth. And such truth is the only safe ground either for academic or political freedom. “Provocative articles” are worthless unless they can be tested. Neither Jefferson himself, nor Lincoln, nor Churchill, were nor wished to be accepted on authority. The swords of argument that they wielded were keen because they had been tempered in the fires of controversy.

Today’s private and elite colleges and universities are administered in very much the same spirit as other corporate enterprises. They depend very much upon the support of the public—beginning with the competition for bright and talented freshmen who have parents willing to make the considerable sacrifices required to pay the high costs. They must continue to persuade these same students, after they become alumni, to

go on paying the old school. Then they must find wealthy donors, corporate and individual, to underwrite buildings, research institutes, scholarship funds, and even professorships. For all these reasons they must maintain a continuous public relations campaign. I am myself flooded with college PR, and know the genre well, since I am on the mailing list of six institutions: besides CMC and CGS, there are the two from which I have earned degrees, and the two from which I have honorary degrees. By far the most sophisticated, and the most intensive, is Yale's. Yet all share one common characteristic: there is not the slightest hint in them of what the real life of the colleges is. Western civilization as a whole—and American civilization in particular—is going through a profound period of inner turmoil and change. No doubt some of it is change for the better. Certainly much of it is change for the worse. But the cockpit of these changes, their dynamic source, is the university. And the one certain and central fact about the universities is not the bitter division of opinion concerning which changes are for the better, and which for the worse, but whether there are any standards by which better and worse can in any way be distinguished. As far as the PR departments are concerned, however, we are all supposed to be so many Mr. (and Ms.) Chips, with our quaint and lovable idiosyncrasies and esoteric—but highly praiseworthy—scholarship. No one, reading official college publications, would have any inkling of the rancid passions, the dislike, animosity, antipathy, and sheer loathing, with which college faculties—and their student followers—look upon each other. The conflicts within the political arena—even such as Watergate, or Irangate, or those that centered around Judge Bork and Senator John Tower—are tepid and polite compared to those within the academy.

There is one thesis that is dominant in the liberal arts curricula today—one that runs through all the social science and humanities departments, e.g., political science, economics, literature, religion, philosophy, history, psychology, sociology, anthropology. That thesis is that there is no objective knowledge of, or rational ground for distinguishing good and bad, right and wrong, just and unjust. All such judgments are said to be value judgments, concerning which reason has nothing to say. The essence of a liberal education consists—at least at first—in becoming a dilettante of the aesthetic ideals expressed in art, architecture, sculpture, music, and literature, and learning to savor the variety of lifestyles expressed in books, religions, philosophies, and cultures. What education displays for us is the variety of forms that human imagination and human taste—including moral taste—takes, but it never tells us that one is truer, more beautiful, or more just than another. It never tells us that human choice can be guided—as the Signers of the Declaration of Independence believed it could be—by the truth about man, God, and the universe.

That the only truth is that there is no truth is however a two-edged sword. As Leo Strauss pointed out, it may at first suggest indifference. But human beings by nature love, and they also hate. By nature, they begin by loving their own. But when they are told that there is no ground for distinguishing their own—or what they love—from the good, they are told that there is no ground for imposing any limits or restraints upon either their loves or their hates. Then the indifference of the dilettante turns quickly into either the adventurism of the scoundrel, or the passionate commitment of the fanatic.

In 1979 Claremont Men's College replaced *Res Publica* with a new publication, *Current*. Its first number featured on its cover a cartoon, of a "Mr. Goodlyfe" who represented, the editors said, what they liked to think of as "the guiding principle" of a CMC education. Anyone who looked closely at the cartoon—which evidently the editors did not do—would have seen that the artist, who was very skillful, had conceived of Mr. Goodlyfe as a thoroughly egocentric and repulsive character. The theme of the good life was chosen however because of the feature article by Professor Steven Smith of CMC's Philosophy Department. It was a celebration of Smith's extremely popular course, "Theories of the Good Life." Cartoon and article together were designed to advertise our commitment to cultural uplift, and to counter the impression among the other Claremont colleges, that CMC was a haven for political reactionaries and cultural barbarians. The fact that students were encouraged by Smith to seek, not merely life, or the means of life, but the good life, was supposed to prove a devotion to the higher things. I say it was "supposed" to do this, although the critique I wrote of Smith's account of his course—entitled "Looking at Mr. Goodlyfe" and reprinted in *American Conservatism and the American Founding* proved I think that it did the exact opposite. The heart of the course was Smith's conviction that he himself knew nothing about what the good life was, and that he had abandoned any idea that he might discover something about it by such an anachronistic method as reading the Bible, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Aquinas, Locke, Kant, Hegel Marx, Mill, Dewey, or anyone else. He had abandoned the quest, because he did not think that the good life was or could be an object of knowing. His course was designed to help his students decide—each for himself—what the good life was—not in itself—but for him. Since it was assumed *a priori* that there was no reason for choosing one life—or lifestyle—over another, the choice was one that could only be made by some nonrational process. And since there was no way to rank the passions—only reason could do that—the course was an exercise in helping one to discover whatever it was that was most agreeable to one's passions.

Some four years later, *Current* again published an article by Professor Smith, entitled "Reflections on Human Liberation." Now what had earlier been implied but not expressed, or not expressed unreservedly, be-

came altogether manifest. The substance, of my critique of this second article—which is also reprinted in *American Conservatism*—is perhaps sufficiently indicated in the title I gave it, “Sodomy and the Academy: The Assault on the Family and Morality by ‘Liberation’ Ethics.” The heart of Professor Smith’s thesis, as he now expressed it, is in these two passages:

The root notion of freedom is, I believe, the spontaneous, uninhibited expression of the integrated self.

And again:

The absence of freedom means therefore the presence of blocks or limitations that prevent unfettered expressions of the self.

In the immediate context, Smith’s argument was directed mainly against the obstacles to liberation that he discovered in what he regarded as sexual stereotypes. His contention was that being born a male or a female was a mere accidental circumstance that ought not in any way to determine the kind of sex role—or sex life—that one might choose. From his perspective, the most inhibiting or limiting of all stereotypes was the traditional family, with its arbitrarily assigned roles, such as masculine fathers and feminine mothers. But Smith’s underlying thesis was that all moral ideas were stereotypes that might limit human freedom. Liberation thus conceived is an end in itself in which no distinction can be drawn between moral probity and moral improbity. No *moral* distinction can be drawn between criminal and non-criminal conduct. That is to say, there is nothing in the idea of liberation that decides criminal conduct may not be more liberating than non-criminal conduct. The only question that liberation ethics asks, is whether a proposed course of life or action accords with the spontaneous, uninhibited, unfettered self. The only categorical imperative is, “If it feels good, do it.” The only counsel of prudence is, “Can you get away with it?” From Smith’s premises, it was clear, the best life, whether in public or in private, was the life of the successful tyrant.

Of course, it goes without saying that *Current* would not publish my critiques of Smith. The editors only saw that I was, once again, “putting down a colleague.” Their response was, in effect, “Does General Motors let Oldsmobile attack Chevrolet?” (In fact, General Motors does!) But I am minded of the fact that Smith is a Harvard trained philosophy professor, and that Derek Bok, President of Harvard, recently extracted 20 million dollars from a former Chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission, under the incredible pretext of establishing an ethics program at Harvard. I am reminded of the occasion, a few years back, when President Bart Giamatti made the central theme of his annual address to the incoming class of freshmen at Yale, to beware of evils of the Moral Majority. Bill Buckley commented that this was like warning someone about to enter a whorehouse of the dangers of the bedbugs. And the rites of spring at Yale these days suggest that the whorehouse analogy has itself become

depressingly anachronistic. A recent visitor to New Haven has described to me the booths set up in front of Sterling Library. They represent "closets" from which initiates ritually emerge. This seems to symbolize the baptism of the spirit by the new religion of relativism. This is how the sinner's "consciousness" is raised, and the devils of racism, sexism, and homophobia are expelled from his soul, no doubt into the Gadarene swine of reactionary moralists. This is the heart of the new—and vigorously intolerant—Puritanism on our campuses. It is more dominant on some campuses than others but—with a very few very honorable exceptions—it is dominant everywhere. Today's university presidents, selling ethics to gullible donors, seem to me to have all the comic qualities, of Chaucer's Pardoner.

I have said that Abraham Lincoln referred to the proposition of human equality in the Declaration of Independence as "an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all time." I recently had occasion to point out that Jesus' admonition, in the Sermon on the Mount, to do unto others as we would have others do unto us, presupposes that very truth. To whom is the Golden Rule addressed? It is not to Jews only. It is not to any nation or race, other than the human race. Nor is it addressed to any part of the human race more than any other. The rule is addressed equally to all human beings everywhere, because and only because, it is assumed that in the decisive and relevant respect all men are created equal. Human beings are equal with respect to certain rights. As we would have others recognize and respect those rights in us, so must we recognize and respect the same rights in others. The Bible—Old and New Testaments—and the Declaration imply not only moral equality among men, but moral responsibility. But the very notion of responsibility implies human freedom as a metaphysical reality.

I remind you of what Thomas Jefferson caused to be inscribed upon his tombstone, as the three things by which he wished most to be remembered. The first was as the author of the Declaration of Independence; next, as the author of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom; and third as the Father of the University of Virginia. The Virginia Statute, although not first, is nonetheless central. Even as the Golden Rule presupposes human equality, so does human equality presuppose the solemn affirmation that "Almighty God hath created the mind free. . . ."

To hold it as a *truth* that all men are created equal, it is necessary to hold that the mind of man is free to grasp truth. If what the mind thinks—or thinks that it thinks—is the involuntary effect of a cause outside the mind, a mere reaction to that cause, then truth is merely an illusion. To say that the mind can hold something as true implies that there is a conformity of the mind with its object. That the object outside the mind determines thought—not by forcing the mind to respond, but by presenting itself as an object of thought, to which the mind responds by its unforced will to know, is what is meant by objectivity. Relativism

in modern philosophy is a by-product of the denial of objectivity in the life of the mind. It goes back to the beginnings of modern philosophy and modern science. Here is the beginning of Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Part I, Chapter I, "Of Sense."

The cause of sense, is the external body, or object, which presseth the organ proper to each sense . . . which pressure, by the mediation of nerves, and other strings, and membranes of the body, continued inwards to the brain, and heart, causeth there a resistance, or counter-pressure, or endeavour of the heart to deliver itself: which endeavour because *outward*, seemeth to be some matter without. And this *seeming* or *fancy*, is that which men call *sense*, and consisteth, as to the eye, in a *light*, or *colour figured*, to the ear, in a *sound*. . . . All which qualities called *sensible*, are in the object that causeth them, but so many motions of the matter by which it presseth our organs diversely.

According to Hobbes sense perception is not an apprehension of anything outside ourselves. Sense perception—and all thought is generated from sense perception—is purely subjective. Human consciousness is a black box receiving signals from the outside, but it must interpret those signals altogether within itself. For Hobbes, the only metaphysical reality is bodies in motion. Psychological reality is a form of physical reality. Our sense organs record reactions to the bodies that impinge upon them, the way billiard balls communicate their motions to each other when they strike each other. The laws of the mind are then aspects of the laws of the motions of matter. Let me remark only in passing that deconstructionism, the current craze in literary scholarship—and the leading edge in liberal arts education—is merely a remote by-product of Hobbesian psychology. The deconstructionists assume *a priori* that the work they are studying has no objective existence—or if it did we would have no access to it—and that literary scholarship consists only in interpreting our reactions to the work—never the work itself.

How fundamental for all the modern centuries has been this view of the mind may be shown by the following, quoted from *The Primary World of Senses* by Erwin Straus, and published in 1963.³ At the Hixon Symposium of 1948, a conference of a small number of physiologists, and psychiatrists . . . (a speaker for the group) formulated an "article of common faith" . . . This "article" states that all phenomena of behavior and mind will ultimately become describable in terms of the mathematical and physical sciences. (p. 106)

This is called by Straus "the credo of objective psychology." For the phenomena of the mind to be described mathematically means, as in the Newtonian universe, that there is no indeterminacy in the record of cause and effect: every action generates an equal and opposite reaction. Any freedom or indeterminacy in the phenomena of the mind would render them not susceptible to scientific description. But without freedom or

indeterminacy, there is nothing recognizably human in the human phenomena. The problem that immediately attends this view of the mind, is that it cannot account for the consciousness of the scientific observer. The scientist cannot at once insist upon the superior truthfulness of his account of the mind, while admitting that what he says is itself subject to the determinism which is his axiomatic premise. The mind of the scientist—and therewith human consciousness properly so called—is no part of the universe [of] science studies. Straus lists as corollaries of this article of faith, that

1. There is no consciousness.
2. There might be consciousness, but there is no proof of its existence or its mode of operation.
3. The question of whether there is consciousness or not is irrelevant, for it cannot be explored by scientific, that is, objective, methods.

For twentieth century psychology, no less than for that of the seventeenth century, the great antagonist is Aristotle. Here is Hobbes again:

But the philosophy-schools, through all the universities of Christendom, grounded upon certain texts of Aristotle teach another doctrine, and say, for the cause of *vision*, that the thing seen, sendeth forth . . . a *visible species*. . . . Nay for the cause of *understanding* also, they say the thing understood sendeth forth an *intelligible species* . . . which coming into the understanding, makes us understand..

Descartes' polemic against Aristotle is no less vehement than Hobbes's.

From the point of view of objective psychology, we are all both blind and deaf. I remind you of the allegory of the three blind men and the elephant. One touches the leg and says it is a tree trunk. Another touches the trunk and says it is a huge reptile. Another touches the inside of the ear, and says it is a silk purse. Of course, when the three compare notes, they realize that each had only partial information. If they keep collecting data they will frame hypotheses to cover more and more data. And with each new hypothesis they will come closer to the truth. Now this is precisely how scientists proceed in discovering, let us say, atomic and subatomic particles, which they see no more than the blind men see the elephant. Of course, they are dealing with phenomena which are outside the scope of sense perception. But when they communicate their findings to each other, they do not blindfold themselves, they do not try to discover each other as if they were subatomic particles or the blind men's elephant. As I have written elsewhere, "[s]cientific rationality is a subspecies of human rationality, but it has no life, or being, apart from that pre-scientific rationality which is the condition of its existence."⁴ The philosopher of pre-scientific rationality is Aristotle. He alone has given a fundamental account of sense perception, memory, imagination, and reason, as

it is experienced in the pre-scientific consciousness, which remains the fundamental dimension of human experience. Only Aristotle has accounted for that consciousness that the Hixon conferees could not think about because it presented insuperable difficulties. Only Aristotle has given an account of that metaphysical freedom of the mind that, as Jefferson rightly declared, is the ground of all moral freedom, and hence of civil and religious liberty.

I can do no more here than indicate the kernel of that account. For Aristotle the eye really sees, because it apprehends the form of the thing seen, without its matter. The signet ring leaves its form in the wax, after it has been removed. The form in the wax is no less the form of the ring, because the ring is no longer there. Also, a mirror records the form of the thing or person who stands before it. Hobbes says that the form in the mirror is an illusion and he ridicules the very idea of a disembodied "species." He does not grant that anything, separated from its matter, can be real. But we in the world of common sense—the world of pre-scientific rationality, the world of Aristotle—know that what we see in the mirror (however distorted it may sometimes be)—is genuine. The fact that the form of a thing can be separated from its matter is the very heart of human understanding, and of human intelligence. Without this possibility, modern science itself would not be possible, because all science presupposes the detachment of the mind from its object as a condition of human speech about the object. Human speech about an object presupposes that we employ common nouns. To say, for example, that this is a chair, implies that there is an infinite number of possible chairs, each different from this one, and yet all equally chairs. The mind has abstracted the idea of the chairs from the visible forms of particular chairs, just as the eye abstracted the visible forms from their matter. The mind frees itself from all sense perception every time it employs a universal, that is, a common noun. The common noun—the ground and basis of what we call common sense—is at once the principal ingredient of the most ordinary experience, and the greatest of all miracles. It exhibits the mind detached from matter, understanding material things just because it is detached from them. In understanding that this is a chair, to repeat, we understand that there is an infinite number of possible chairs, each different from this. We understand that there is no particular color that makes a chair a chair. If any element in the idea of the chair had color—or any other sensible quality—then to that extent the mind could not comprehend chairs. For the idea of a chair to be the intelligible basis for perceiving any possible chairs, it must be abstracted from all sensible qualities. Only then will it be seen that all chairs are equally chairs. Only when we see that there is an infinite variety of possible human beings, each equally human, do we begin to understand the difference between the human and the non-human. Only then can we see that men are not dogs or hogs or horses—or gods. Only then can the moral function of

human intelligence begin to function. A philosophy or a psychology that denies the metaphysical freedom of the mind that was axiomatic for Jefferson can form no part of liberal education, for liberal education means education in freedom and for freedom. It means education in the metaphysical reality of such a universe as the Declaration of Independence proclaims. This is a universe whose purposes are real, because—if we think about it—we participate in those purposes every time we think. Because we know we can think, we know we can think well or ill. Because we know we can think, we know we can think about right and wrong, good and evil. Understanding that we can understand, we can understand what are our rights, and what are our duties. Understanding this, we understand that the fate of our civilization is yet in our hands, because it is in our minds. We can “do our duty as we understand it.”⁵

NOTES

1. Valedictory Lecture, delivered at Bauer Auditorium, Claremont McKenna College, Claremont, California, April 14, 1989. It was met with booing and a walkout in protest and cheers in support. All footnotes are by the editors.
2. Harry V. Jaffa, “Amoral America and the Liberal Dilemma” in *The Conditions of Freedom: Essays in Political Philosophy* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 273–280.
3. Erwin W. Straus, *The Primary World of Senses* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963).
4. Harry V. Jaffa, “Judicial Conscience and Natural Rights: A Reply to Professor Ledewitz” 1998 *Seattle Law Review* [formerly *University of Puget Sound Law Review*] 11:219, 227. Reprinted in Harry V. Jaffa, with Bruce Ledewitz, Robert L. Stone, George Anastaplo, Foreword by Lewis E. Lehrman, *Original Intent and the Framers of the Constitution: A Disputed Question* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1994), 243.
5. Abraham Lincoln, “Cooper Institute Address,” February 27, 1860.